Four Story Magazine #2

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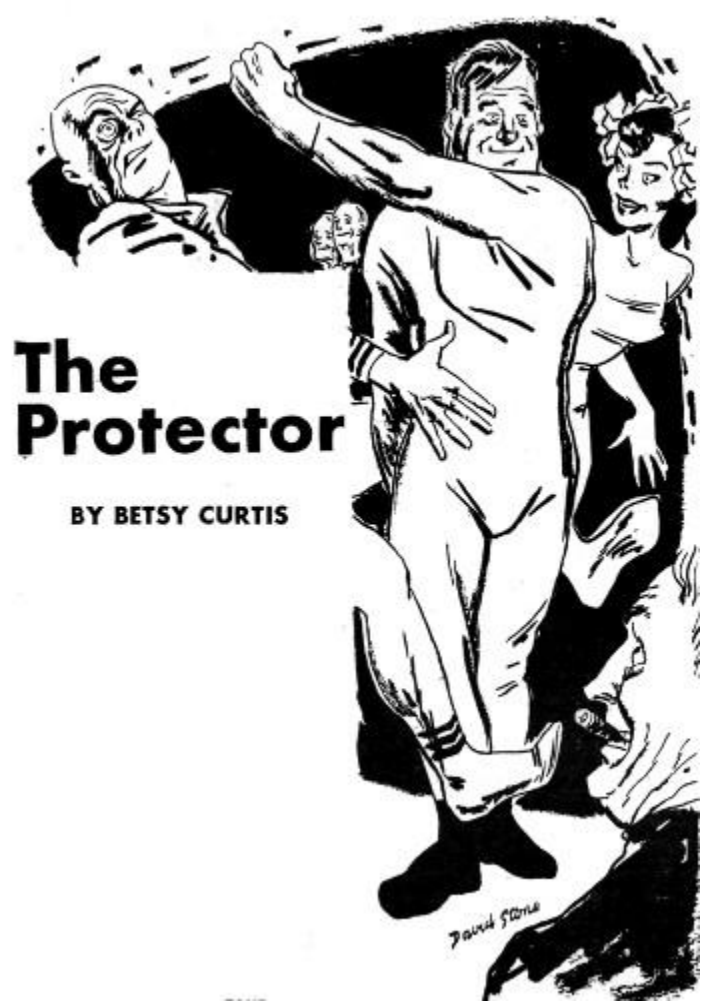

THE PROTECTOR
by Betsy Curtis

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There's a fortune in a boxer who feels no pain.
This one didn't, except in odd ways....

How come I live here on Gorlin permanent? Well, it's something like this.

There is nobody real surprised when some scientist writes an article in the Sunday supplement about the primitive tribes of Anestha dying out probably. The Anesthon natives is freaks, anyway, and folks just naturally figure they can't last long in stiff competition. If you are like them and your body don't feel any pain any time, you need a nursemaid around to keep you from doing dumb things, like walking in front of a truck or starving to death.

I am here on Gorlin a couple times and know about 'em. Some folks think it's comical to watch the space crews think up ways to give an Anesthon a workout. I see one Anesthon girl--a real looker she is, too--dance fourteen hours before she gives out, just for a bottle of perfume and one of them Venusian fur lounge robes. They sure enjoy their pleasures, even if they never feel no pain. You feeling any? More thiska?

Hey, Noor! Another round of thiska for the boys!

Well, they can feel your feelings, and any thoughts that are about them, too. I guess all they live for is pleasure and a pat on the back. One time a little runty Anesthon guy even builds a whole stone blockhouse for a first looie, when the looie thinks real hard that the little guy looks like a first-rate hod carrier. Time the house is built, the Anesthon's hands is all bloody and one ankle broke where a chunk of rock drops on him. He don't notice it, of course.

Pierre gets all worked up about them Anestha dying out. That's my

boy Pierre, the heavyweight. I name him Pierre so's nobody thinks he is tough till afterward. He comes from Gorlin. Of course I have to stable him on Venus long enough for a legal residence, or the Boxing Commission would have him investigated and maybe banned from the ring as a telepath. Tough training him, too. He can't see the sense of fighting, but, man, he can stay in the ring all night. He never does get real speedy on his feet, but he learns fast and packs a wicked left. I don't have to lie when I am thinking real hard he is champeen material.

Anyhow, Pierre gets all worked up over his race getting extinct. He has a sister who is glenched to some nice boy and his old man is some sort of a chief. He is all for beating it back by the next via-Venus ship to see what is getting at the old folks at home. I calm him down though, give him a couple of shots of thiska and say I better take him around to see that scientist-dopester and get the inside first. I have to go everywhere with him to see he doesn't break a leg and forget to tell me about it.

* * * * *

So we hop a TAT in Chi and make for Washington where this science fellow is with some Smithsonian Institute. He is nice enough about seeing us, but he can't figure how a Chinaman like Pierre has any call to be steamed up about the Anestha (you seen these Anestha with their slick black hair and goldy skin and smooth eyelids like a Earth Chinaman) so I have to break down and tell him about Pierre being an Anesthon.

That scientist is pretty peeved with me bringing Pierre into the Earth system, but when I tell him Pierre wants to go back to help out the folks, he kind of clams up and says the article is just one of those Sunday paper things. There don't really seem to be anything wrong on Gorlin except that all the workers are getting more careless than usual, falling off walls they are building and getting hit by rocks during blasting, or walking in front of full cars in the mines.

Pierre gives the man a look. "Workers? Mines? Blasting?" he says. "What gives? There are no mines on Gorlin," he says, "just a few quarries and a lot of big farms. We never have to kill ourselves working. What gives?" he says.

"Oh," the man comes back, "there's a couple big targ mines in full swing. Some big Earth concern is shipping out the stuff five freighters

a day to Mercury for mass insulation. All native workers. They don't get paid much--weej cigarettes, bubble bath, some thiska, electro-fur blankets, stuff like that--but I don't hear yapping. If I do, I report anything that looks like slavery." Of course he says it with a lot of grammar and it takes him a half hour, but that is the slant.

He wants to gab some then with Pierre. I see that the boy is getting jittery and homesick, too, when the guy starts raving about swimming in the flaff pools and the feeling of katweela petals under your bare feet, so I says we have to catch a plane and get out of there.

Pierre still wants to head for Gorlin. He says his people must be unhappy about something or they are more careful. Life on Gorlin is too much fun to just go and die for no reason.

I try to pep him up on the way back to Chi, talking about his next fight with Kid Bop, but he says he can't see any reason in fighting, either, just now. I tell him I think he kind of likes fighting, but he says what he likes is the nice things I think about him when he wins, and he is too worried about his family to pay much attention to what I think just now.

* * * * *

Well, we are both pretty flush from one of the best fight seasons I ever see and a rest won't hurt the boy, so I say okay, we are going by the first liner off the Flats.

"You don't have to go, Joe," he says. "Keep your dough and train a couple more kids. I may not be back," he says.

"Look, boy," I says, "you know what the food is like on them liners," I says, kind of kidding, "and if there's nobody around to cram it down you, you don't eat, and if you don't eat, you starve--and if you starve, you are in no condition to cheer up your sister and your old man. Besides," I says, "I can afford a vacation and you're the only fighter I want to work with. You've got a real future," I says, "and I'm going to bring you back alive."

I guess that makes him feel kind of good, because he grins first time since he reads that paper and says, "All right, Joe, come on along."

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We buy a few pretties and neckties in the station and ship out of Chi for the Flats on the next TAT. Pierre wants to get some perfume for his sister, but I tell him we can get better on Venus, where all the good stuff is made.

The trip from Venus Space Base to Gorlin is fast on account of over-drive, but even so I have no trouble passing Pierre off as a fighter who has the jitters and is headed for a vacation where he learns to take it easy the easy way. He is always burning his fingers or his mouth on a cigarette, and I have to keep an eye on him all the time. Nerves, I explain to the passengers.

When we land, Pierre is all for hunting up his folks, but I says no, if there is some trouble, it is smarter to case the joint. We check in at the swanky tourist hotel. She is new since I am on Gorlin a couple years ago and what class! She is built around one of the biggest flaff pools on the whole planet and our room is completely lined with padded velvety stuff, sort of a deep red color, and the bathroom has a cloudrift shower that you nearly float away on.

But Pierre just doesn't relax. I keep trying to make him get in the shower, but it is no use. He says he is just too worried to take any pleasure in it. I don't think we ought to go scouting till night and that is thirty some hours yet, but when I see he is settling down to wear the fuzz right off the floor walking round and round, I give in, feed him a sandwich I bring from the ship, and we stroll off in the woods like we are looking for flowers.

There are no signs around the hotel saying which way to the mines, so we set off to circle the hotel and spaceport clearing to look for the rail-line that brings the targ to the port. I figure we have gone about two-thirds of the way around when I nearly fall over a guy sitting on the ground with his head in his hands. What I think is katweela flowers is just the red Anesthon kloa he has on. He looks up sort of dull and then he sees Pierre with me. He lets out a yip and sits back hard on the ground and moans. Pierre yanks the fellow up on his feet and hugs him and starts to jabber away so fast I can't tell what he is saying. Foreigners always talk faster than anybody else. The other guy puts in a word or two every once in a while and then he scrams off through the trees.

"That's Noor," Pierre informs me, "the guy my sister Jennel is glenched to. He's gonna get us a couple of kloas so nobody'll notice us around the mine. He's feeling mighty low, but I can't figure out

why. He says Jennel and the old man are okay, only he can't ever carry Jennel to his own house because he ain't man enough. I don't get it. He can make a good fighter, Joe."

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Before you can count three, Noor is back again with the kloas and Pierre strips and gets into his. I ain't too keen to show my shapelies, but Pierre starts grabbing my shirt and I have to put the kloa on or else. The boys head south at a good clip and I tag along trying to catch up and find out the score. When Pierre sees I am making like winded, he slows down and tells me we are going to the mine owner's fancy dump about two miles down the drag. Pierre says Noor tells him the mine owner doesn't like him and he has to leave us when we get in sight of the house.

After about a mile, Noor begins to drag along. Then he just sits down under another tree and says that is the end of the line for him. He points through the trees and says go on, maybe he is still there when we come back, maybe not. While Pierre is jawing with him, I look up the trail and see a Anesthon babe about a hundred feet away. You can tell it is a babe from one of them blue and green mollos draped around her over the kloa.

Noor sees her, too, and takes off like a bat back the way we come. Pierre jogs ahead and when I get up with him, there he is hugging and jabbering again.

"My sister Jennel," he says, and, "Jennel, this is Joe, my manager."

She is a cute trick with lots of yumph showing through the mollo. She stands kind of slumped, though, and a few of the flowers in her shiny black hair are pretty mashed.

"'Smatter, Jennel?" I says. "You look kind of dragged out for a dame whose brother comes home practically a champeen. Katweela flowers go on strike?" I says, just trying to make talk.

She slumps a little more and says the boss don't like her and how it's too bad her brother has to come home and find her still alive and cluttering up the woods.

I tell Pierre she better take us to this boss that don't like a babe like her, but she just shakes her head and says go that way and we

come to the house. Then she says the boss makes the natives use the employees' entrance on the other side of the house and she offers to take and show us the way. She kind of twitches when she says "natives."

She don't even says yes or no all the way to the gate till, just before we get there, I trip on a root and bang my knee on a rock on the way down. Well, I howl and cuss some and she comes up close and asks me what seems to be the matter. I tell her the blamed rock hurts my knee and I think real hard about how her knee would feel if a rock hits it and she busts right out crying.

"Oh, you poor man, you poor man, you," she sobs. "That rock don't like you at all."

"It don't hate me, either," I says. "It's only a rock."

"But it makes a hurt to you. It don't love you and now you are not happy where there's any rocks because they don't love you," she says, and she helps me up and starts dragging me along, still crying like crazy.

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I don't make nothing out of that, but pretty soon we come to a little gate in a thick row of bushes. Jennel lets go of me then and says she hopes Pierre is a strong man and a good worker and that the boss likes him. And then she gives a big sigh and says if the boss don't like him, we can find her over there where the men are cutting down a bunch of trees, because if one of the trees likes her, it will maybe fall on her pretty soon.

Pierre tells her to wait right there by the gate because he is coming back. He isn't looking for work so the boss won't care if he is strong or not. She just sighs again and sits down on the grass and whimpers.

Pierre tries once more to get her to tell him what is the matter, but all she says is that their father and some other fellow named Frith are up at the big house. They are being talked to by the boss about not getting out enough targ on the shifts where they are foremen, and she says how sad it is about Pierre coming home.

It is just beginning to filter through my thick skull that the boss is connected with all this dying out of the Anestha, as the Sunday paper puts it, and I grab Pierre away from Jennel and hustle him through the

gate.

"Look, Pierre," I says, "we'll go around and listen by them long windows and see what cooks. I'll bet that boss is up to something dirty in there. If he is the one who messed up Jennel," I says, "we better just mess him up some."

There is nobody in sight on the lawn and we just march up to the window easy as pie. There is this big booming voice giving somebody what for.

"You poor miserable idiots," yells this voice, "you can't keep the workers off the tracks and you get out less than twenty tons of targ since last night, and then you waste a whole charge of nitro by not telling the watchman he's not supposed to smoke in the enclosure. All those people are dead and it's your fault."

I hear a sniffle behind me and when I turn around, there is Jennel. She has sneaked up behind us to see what we are going to do.

"That's how he talks to me, too," she lets us know in a whisper, "only he says I am not fit to even wash dishes, let alone ever have a house of my own ... when I drop one of his plates a little while ago. He says I am looking in a mirror instead of where I am going and he hopes I see what an ugly pan I have, because I ought to know it and keep out of people's way so they won't have to look at me." Her tears splash right down on the grass.

"And that's not all," the yelling inside goes on. "Not only do you kill off all my workers, but at this rate I'm losing money paying you four packs of cigarettes a day. If I have to blast off and start from scratch in some other part of this blamed universe, you stupid, gutless ... why, you aren't even men. You worms don't even run when you see a car coming at you. Too blamed dumb to come in out of the rain."

I stick my head around the corner and look in, and there is the back of a big guy in a Mercury-made suit and with a bald head that is red all the way round to the back of his neck. On the other side of the room I see a couple of the sorriest-looking Anestha God ever makes, shuffling their feet and looking like kicked dogs.

I turn to Pierre. "Go in there swinging," I says, like at a fight, and pull the window open.

"He won't like me," Pierre says, hanging back. "He says Anestha are

dumb cowards. Maybe he knows. Maybe I won't dare hit him."

"You get in there and poke him, boy," I says and give him a push. "I like you and I see you fight and the Anestha got more guts than anybody!"

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The big guy hears us and turns around. "Get out of here, you mangy natives," he bellows. "You good for nothing, shivering, sniveling, cowardly boobs. I'm not ready for you yet." He is shaking a whippy-looking cane at me and Pierre, and I think he has turned purple.

"We're ready for you, though," I yell back. I climb into the room pulling Pierre in after me. "Pierre's no sniveling coward and you can quit talking to his brave, heroic, self-sacrificing father like that. Put 'em up and defend yourself, you howling ape," I yell, "because Pierre is going to give you the beating of your howling life!"

I see Pierre's old man and the other fellow spruce up some.

The big guy sits down in a chair real quick, and, sucking in a big breath, he starts going all fatherly at Pierre, telling him that he doesn't want to have to hit him back, because Pierre will not feel it when he kills him, which he doesn't want to have to do because Pierre is just a poor weak Anesthon who don't know from nothing, and he doesn't want to injure any of his workers and he is just telling Pierre's old man a few things to protect the Anestha.

Pierre looks at me kind of doubtful.

"Go on, hit the fat bully," I says, real icy. "He has it coming. You owe it to your old man and Noor and Jennel here. Go ahead and show him what kind of champeens the Anestha can turn out. It's just for his own good," I says, "so hit him now. Then you can tell your dad what a great guy you are."

Pierre's left obediently swings into the lug's jaw with a crack like a rifle. He don't even watch the big guy sag down on the floor. He begins hugging his father and the other fellow and grinning and jabbering away like blue blazes.

The big guy is still breathing, but out cold, so I go to look for a tele-viz. I figure the authorities better hear my story before the big

guy wakes up.

After I make my spiel, the port chief says to come in and bring Pierre and his father and Frith and Jennel and Noor, too, if we can find him, and make an official recorded report. He is sending a doctor out by 'copter.

We beat it for the port, leaving the fat boss sleeping on the floor.

We all stay in protective custody at the hotel, swimming in flaff and lounging around the thiska bar for a couple of weeks, until the commission headed by that scientist from the Smithsonian Institute comes out and takes the boss back to Earth. He has to see a judge about why he should not go into stir for a while for psychological coercion or something like that.

Before they leave, the commission hands me an official charge at a hundred thou a year to stay as Protector of Morale to the Anestha. That is better than the fight racket, but the protectorship is a laugh. I can't even go out for a walk without a couple dozen Anestha tagging along, to keep me from stubbing my toe on some unfriendly pebble, or socking my eye on some unloving devil of a doorknob.

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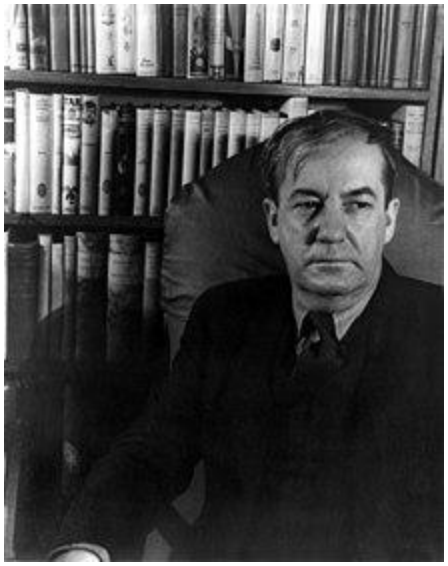

Anderson

MOTHER
from the Project Gutenberg etext of "Winesburg, Ohio",
by Sherwood Anderson. 1919

Elizabeth Willard, the mother of George Willard, was tall and gaunt and her face was marked with smallpox scars. Alethough she was but forty-five, some obscure disease had taken the fire out of her figure. Listlessly she went about the disorderly old hotellooking at the faded wall-paper and the ragged carpets and, when she was able to be about, doing the work of a chambermaid among beds soiled by the slumbers of fat traveling men. Her husband, Tom Willard, a slender, graceful man with square shoulders, a quick military step, and a black mustache, trained to turn sharply up at the ends, tried to put the wife out of his mind. The presence of the tall ghostly figure, moving slowly through the halls, he took as a reproach lo himself. When he thought of her he grew angry and swore. The hotel was unprofitable and forever on the edge of failure and he wished himself out of it. He thought of the old house and the woman who lived there with him as things defeated and done for. The hotel in which he had begun life so hopefully was now a mere ghost of what a hotel should be. As he went spruce and businesslike through the streets of Winesburg, he sometimes stopped and turned quickly about as though fearing that the spirit of the hotel and of the woman would follow him even into the streets. “Damn such a life, damn it!” he sputtered aimlessly.

Tom Willard had a passion for village politics and for years had been the leading Democrat in a strongly Republican community. Some day, he told himself, the tide of things political will turn in my favor and the years of ineffectual service count big in the bestowal of rewards. He dreamed of going to Congress and even of becoming governor. Once when a younger member of the party arose at a political conference and began to boast of his faithful service, Tom Willard grew white with fury. “Shut up, you,” he roared, glaring about. “What do you know of service? What are you but a boy ? Look at what I’ve done here! I was a Democrat here in Winesburg when it was a crime to be a Democrat. In the old days they fairly hunted us with guns.”

Between Elizabeth and her one son George there was a deep unexpressed bond of sympathy, based on a girlhood dream that had long ago died. In the son’s presence she was timid and reserved, but sometimes while he hurried about town intent upon his duties as a reporter, she went into his room and closing the door knelt by a little desk, made of a kitchen table, that sat near a window. In the room by the desk she wentthrough a ceremony thatwas half a prayer, half a demand, addressed to the skies. In the boyish figure she yearned to see something half forgotten that had once been a part of herself recreated. The prayer concerned that. “Even though I die, I will in some way keep defeat from you,” she cried, and so deep was her determination that her whole body shook. Her eyes glowed and she clenched her fists. “If I am dead and see him becoming a meaningless drab figure like myself, I will come back,” she declared. “I ask God now to give me that privilege. I demand it. I will pay for it. God may beat me with his fists. I will take any blow that may befall if but this my boy be allowed to express something for us both." Pausing uncertainly, the woman stared about the boy's room. "And do not let him become smart and successful either," she added vaguely.

The communion between George Willard and his mother was outwardly a formal thing without meaning. When she was ill and sat by the window in her room he sometimes went in the evening to make her a visit. They sat by a window that looked over the roof of a small frame building into Main Street. By turning their heads they

could see through another window, along an alleyway that ran behind the Main Street stores and into the back door of Abner Groff's bakery. Sometimes as they sat thus a picture of village life presented itself to them. At the back door of his shop appeared Abner Groff with a stick or an empty milk bottle in his hand. For a long time there was a feud between the baker and a grey cat that belonged to Sylvester West, the druggist. The boy and his mother saw the cat creep into the door of the bakery and presently emerge followed by the baker, who swore and waved his arms about. The baker's eyes were small and red and his black hair and beard were filled with flour dust. Sometimes he was so angry that, although the cat had disappeared, he hurled sticks, bits of broken glass, and even some of the tools of his trade about. Once he broke a window at the back of Sinning's Hardware Store. In the alley the grey cat crouched behind barrels filled with torn paper and broken bottles above which flew a black swarm of flies. Once when she was alone, and after watching a prolonged and ineffectual outburst on the part of the baker, Elizabeth Willard put her head down on her long white hands and wept. After that she did not look along the alleyway any more, but tried to forget the contest between the bearded man and the cat. It seemed like a rehearsal of her own life, terrible in its vividness.

In the evening when the son sat in the room with his mother, the silence made them both feel awkward. Darkness came on and the evening train came in at the station. In the street below feet tramped up and down upon a board sidewalk. In the station yard, after the evening train had gone, there was a heavy silence. Perhaps Skinner Leason, the express agent, moved a truck the length of the station platform. Over on Main Street sounded a man's voice, laughing. The door of the express office banged. George Willard arose and crossing the room fumbled for the doorknob. Sometimes he knocked against a chair, making it scrape along the floor. By the window sat the sick woman, perfectly still, listless. Her long hands, white and bloodless, could be seen drooping over the ends of the arms of the chair. "I think you had better be out among the boys. You are too much indoors," she said, striving to

relieve the embarrassment of the departure. "I thought I would take a walk," replied George Willard, who felt awkward and confused.

One evening in July, when the transient guests who made the New Willard House their temporary home had become scarce, and the hallways, lighted only by kerosene lamps turned low, were plunged in gloom, Elizabeth Willard had an adventure. She had been ill in bed for several days and her son had not come to visit her. She was alarmed. The feeble blaze of life that remained in her body was blown into a flame by her anxiety and she crept out of bed, dressed and hurried along the hallway toward her son's room, shaking with exaggerated fears. As she went along she steadied herself with her hand, slipped along the papered walls of the hall and breathed with difficulty. The air whistled through her teeth. As she hurried forward she thought how foolish she was. "He is concerned with boyish affairs," she told herself. "Perhaps he has now begun to walk about in the evening with girls."

Elizabeth Willard had a dread of being seen by guests in the hotel that had once belonged to her father and the ownership of which still stood recorded in her name in the county courthouse. The hotel was continually losing patronage because of its shabbiness and she thought of herself as also shabby. Her own room was in an obscure corner and when she felt able to work she voluntarily worked among the beds, preferring the labor that could be done when the guests were abroad seeking trade among the merchants of Winesburg.

By the door of her son's room the mother knelt upon the floor and listened for some sound from within. When she heard the boy moving about and talking in low tones a smile came to her lips. George Willard had a habit of talking aloud to himself and to hear him doing so had always given his mother a peculiar pleasure. The habit in him, she felt, strengthened the secret bond that existed between them. A thousand times she had whispered to herself of the matter. "He is groping about, trying to find himself," she thought. "He is not a dull clod, all words and smartness. Within him there

is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself."

In the darkness in the hallway by the door the sick woman arose and started again toward her own room. She was afraid that the door would open and the boy come upon her. When she had reached a safe distance and was about to turn a corner into a second hallway she stopped and bracing herself with her hands waited, thinking to shake off a trembling fit of weakness that had come upon her. The presence of the boy in the room had made her happy. In her bed, during the long hours alone, the little fears that had visited her had become giants. Now they were all gone. "When I get back to my room I shall sleep," she murmured gratefully.

But Elizabeth Willard was not to return to her bed and to sleep. As she stood trembling in the darkness the door of her son's room opened and the boy's father, Tom Willard, stepped out. In the light that steamed out at the door he stood with the knob in his hand and talked. What he said infuriated the woman.

Tom Willard was ambitious for his son. He had always thought of himself as a successful man, although nothing he had ever done had turned out successfully. However, when he was out of sight of the New Willard House and had no fear of coming upon his wife, he swaggered and began to dramatize himself as one of the chief men of the town. He wanted his son to succeed. He it was who had secured for the boy the position on the Winesburg Eagle. Now, with a ring of earnestness in his voice, he was advising concerning some course of conduct. "I tell you what, George, you've got to wake up," he said sharply. "Will Henderson has spoken to me three times concerning the matter. He says you go along for hours not hearing when you are spoken to and acting like a gawky girl. What ails you?" Tom Willard laughed good-naturedly. "Well, I guess you'll get over it," he said. "I told Will that. You're not a fool and you're not a woman. You're Tom Willard's son and you'll wake up. I'm not afraid. What you say clears things up. If being a newspaper man had put the notion of becoming a writer into your mind that's all right. Only I guess

you'll have to wake up to do that too, eh?"

Tom Willard went briskly along the hallway and down a flight of stairs to the office. The woman in the darkness could hear him laughing and talking with a guest who was striving to wear away a dull evening by dozing in a chair by the office door. She returned to the door of her son's room. The weakness had passed from her body as by a miracle and she stepped boldly along. A thousand ideas raced through her head. When she heard the scraping of a chair and the sound of a pen scratching upon paper, she again turned and went back along the hallway to her own room.

A definite determination had come into the mind of the defeated wife of the Winesburg hotel keeper. The determination was the result of long years of quiet and rather ineffectual thinking. "Now," she told herself, "I will act. There is something threatening my boy and I will ward it off." The fact that the conversation between Tom Willard and his son had been rather quiet and natural, as though an understanding existed between them, maddened her. Although for years she had hated her husband, her hatred had always before been a quite impersonal thing. He had been merely a part of something else that she hated. Now, and by the few words at the door, he had become the thing personified. In the darkness of her own room she clenched her fists and glared about. Going to a cloth bag that hung on a nail by the wall she took out a long pair of sewing scissors and held them in her hand like a dagger. "I will stab him," she said aloud. "He has chosen to be the voice of evil and I will kill him. When I have killed him something will snap within myself and I will die also. It will be a release for all of us."

In her girlhood and before her marriage with Tom Willard, Elizabeth had borne a somewhat shaky reputation in Winesburg. For years she had been what is called "stage-struck" and had paraded through the streets with traveling men guests at her father's hotel, wearing loud clothes and urging them to tell her of life in the cities out of which they had come. Once she startled the town by putting on men's clothes and

riding a bicycle down Main Street.

In her own mind the tall dark girl had been in those days much confused. A great restlessness was in her and it expressed itself in two ways. First there was an uneasy desire for change, for some big definite movement to her life. It was this feeling that had turned her mind to the stage. She dreamed of joining some company and wandering over the world, seeing always new faces and giving something out of herself to all people. Sometimes at night she was quite beside herself with the thought, but when she tried to talk of the matter to the members of the theatrical companies that came to Winesburg and stopped at her father's hotel, she got nowhere. They did not seem to know what she meant, or if she did get something of her passion expressed, they only laughed. "It's not like that," they said. "It's as dull and uninteresting as this here. Nothing comes of it."

With the traveling men when she walked about with them, and later with Tom Willard, it was quite different. Always they seemed to understand and sympathize with her. On the side streets of the village, in the darkness under the trees, they took hold of her hand and she thought that something unexpressed in herself came forth and became a part of an unexpressed something in them.

And then there was the second expression of her restlessness. When that came she felt for a time released and happy. She did not blame the men who walked with her and later she did not blame Tom Willard. It was always the same, beginning with kisses and ending, after strange wild emotions, with peace and then sobbing repentance. When she sobbed she put her hand upon the face of the man and had always the same thought. Even though he were large and bearded she thought he had become suddenly a little boy. She wondered why he did not sob also.

In her room, tucked away in a corner of the old Willard House, Elizabeth Willard lighted a lamp and put it on a dressing table that stood by the door. A thought had

come into her mind and she went to a closet and brought out a small square box and set it on the table. The box contained material for make-up and had been left with other things by a theatrical company that had once been stranded in Winesburg. Elizabeth Willard had decided that she would be beautiful. Her hair was still black and there was a great mass of it braided and coiled about her head. The scene that was to take place in the office below began to grow in her mind. No ghostly worn-out figure should confront Tom Willard, but something quite unexpected and startling. Tall and with dusky cheeks and hair that fell in a mass from her shoulders, a figure should come striding down the stairway before the startled loungers in the hotel office. The figure would be silent--it would be swift and terrible. As a tigress whose cub had been threatened would she appear, coming out of the shadows, stealing noiselessly along and holding the long wicked scissors in her hand.

With a little broken sob in her throat, Elizabeth Willard blew out the light that stood upon the table and stood weak and trembling in the darkness. The strength that had been as a miracle in her body left and she half reeled across the floor, clutching at the back of the chair in which she had spent so many long days staring out over the tin roofs into the main street of Winesburg. In the hallway there was the sound of footsteps and George Willard came in at the door. Sitting in a chair beside his mother he began to talk. "I'm going to get out of here," he said. "I don't know where I shall go or what I shall do but I am going away."

The woman in the chair waited and trembled. An impulse came to her. "I suppose you had better wake up," she said. "You think that? You will go to the city and make money, eh? It will be better for you, you think, to be a business man, to be brisk and smart and alive?" She waited and trembled.

The son shook his head. "I suppose I can't make you understand, but oh, I wish I could," he said earnestly. "I can't even talk to father about it. I don't try.

There isn't any use. I don't know what I shall do. I just want to go away and look at people and think."

Silence fell upon the room where the boy and woman sat together. Again, as on the other evenings, they were embarrassed. After a time the boy tried again to talk. "I suppose it won't be for a year or two but I've been thinking about it," he said, rising and going toward the door. "Something father said makes it sure that I shall have to go away." He fumbled with the doorknob. In the room the silence became unbearable to the woman. She wanted to cry out with joy because of the words that had come from the lips of her son, but the expression of joy had become impossible to her. "I think you had better go out among the boys. You are too much indoors," she said. "I thought I would go for a little walk," replied the son stepping awkwardly out of the room and closing the door.

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Brand

THE LAUGHTER OF SLIM MALONE
By Max Brand
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[Transcriber's Note: This story appeared in the June 14, 1919 issue of *All-Story Weekly* magazine]

Time has little to do with reputation in the far West, and accordingly the name of Slim Malone grew old in the region of Appleton, and yet the owner of the name was still young.

Appleton was somewhat of a misnomer, for the region had never known anything save imported apples or any other sort of fruit since the time of its birth into the history of whisky and revolvers. But a misguided pioneer in the old days had raised a few scrubby trees and had named the town forever. The dreams of the early agriculturalists had died long ago, but the name remained to pique the curiosity of travelers and furnish jokes for inhabitants.

The town lay at the conjunction of three gorges in the heart of the Rockies, and the little plain where it nestled was crowded with orchards which bore everything but apples. The six original trees which had given the town its name now stood in the back yard of Sandy Orton's saloon—old trees with knotted and mossy limbs which suggested a venerable age due to the hard climate rather than to the passage of years. They were pointed out to casual travelers with great pride, and

they were the established toast of Sandy's place. But Sandy's was frequented by a loud-voiced and spendthrift crowd not usual to agricultural towns.

In the old days, when Appleton was a name rather than a fact, the hilarity had been as absent as the men; but after gold was discovered in the three gorges which led from the settlement into the heart of the mountains, the little town became a rendezvous of a thousand adventurers. The stages to and from the railroad thirty miles away, were crowded with men eager to face the hardships of the climate and the great adventure of the gold-fields.

It was then that Slim Malone appeared. It was said that he had first come upon the scene as the owner of the Red River strike, which was finally owned by Sandy Gleason. It was further rumored that Sandy had beaten Slim Malone out of the claim by a very shady deal at cards; but Sandy refused to discuss the matter, and Slim Malone was rarely within vocal range, so the matter had never been sifted. Sandy was rarely more vocal than a grunt, and when Slim Malone appeared, people had generally other things to think about than questions concerning his past.

A certain percentage of lawlessness is taken for granted in a mining town. People are too busy with their own concerns to pay attention to their neighbors, but when three stages in succession, passing from Appleton to Concord, the nearest railroad station, were robbed by a rider on a white horse, the community awoke and waxed wrath. The loss was too much in common to be passed over.

The first effort was an impromptu organization of half a dozen angered miners who rode into the Weston Hills. They found fresh hoof-prints after an hour of riding, and went on greatly encouraged, with the pistols loosened in their holsters. After some hours of hard travel they came upon a white horse in the midst of a hollow, and then spread into a circle and approached cautiously. But not cautiously enough. While they were still far from the white horse the bandit opened fire upon them from the shelter of a circle of rocks. They rode into town the next day with three of their number badly hurt and the other three marked for life. That started the war.

As the months passed posse after posse left Appleton and started to scour the Weston Hills for the marauder. The luckiest of the expeditions came back telling tales of a sudden fusillade from an unexpected covert, and then a swift white horse scouring into the

distance. The majority came back with no tales at all save of silent mountains and the grim cactus of the desert.

In the mean time the stages from Appleton to Concord were held up with a monotonous regularity by a rider of a fleet white horse, and the mining town grew more and more irate. Men cursed the name of Slim Malone. An adventurous singer in one of Appleton's dance halls invented a song featuring the marauder, and it was taken up by the matrons of the town as a sort of scare-crow ballad to hush their children.

Then the new mayor came to Appleton. He owned three claims on Askwarthy Gulch, and he ran on the double platform of no-license for the Appleton saloons and the end of Slim Malone. The women used their influence because of the first clause in his platform, and the men voted for him because of the second. His name was Orval Kendricks, but that didn't count. What mattered was his red hair and the statements of his platform. Slim Malone celebrated the new reign of holding up two stages within the first five days.

But the new mayor lived up to the color of his hair, and proved worthy of his platform. He held a meeting of every able-bodied citizen in town three days after his inauguration, and in his speech the men noted with relief that he forgot to mention the saloons, and that he concentrated his attention on Slim Malone. He stated that the good name and the prosperity of Appleton depended upon the capture of this marauder at once. Divorced from the mayor's rather sounding rhetoric, the populace of Appleton realized the truth of his remarks and applauded him to the echo. His silences were as much appreciated as his words.

After a carefully prepared peroration he built up to his climax by the proposal that the community import "Lefty" Cornwall, at a salary of five hundred dollars a month and five thousand bonus, to act as deputy sheriff until the apprehension of Slim Malone. Then the crowd applauded to the echo. In their midst were men who had lost more than five thousand at a blow owing to the strenuous activity of this Slim Malone. They were equal to any measures for his suppression even if it meant the importation of Lefty Cornwall.

The fame of Lefty had begun in Texas when he mortally wounded one greaser and crippled two others in a saloon fight. Since then it had increased and spread until he was a household word even farther north than Appleton. He came from that sun-burned southland where a man's

prowess was gaged by his speed and dexterity with his “irons,” and even on that northern plateau of Appleton men knew that to cross Lefty Cornwall was death or murderous mutilation.

At first there were some dissenters. Men stated freely that Lefty would never dream of coming as far north as Appleton for a paltry five thousand dollars. There were even a few dissenters who claimed that even should he come he would never be able to cope with Slim Malone, but these were laughed and hooted down by a radical minority who came from the southland and knew the fame of Lefty Cornwall in detail. The sheriff accounted for the others by stating that he had already communicated with Lefty, and had received his assent by letter. This announcement dissolved the meeting in cheers.

Appleton decreed the day of the arrival of the new sheriff a festival occasion. The farmers from the adjoining table-land drove into town, the miners from the three valleys rode down. And when the stage arrived from Concord the incipient sheriff dismounted in the midst of a huge crowd, and cheers which shook the sign-board of Sandy Orton’s saloon.

Now the mayor of Appleton had declared deathless war against the saloons in his platform, but since his election he had been strangely silent upon the liquor question. He was as canny as his red hair suggested, and he had a truly Scotch insight into the crucial moments of life. He perceived the arrival of Lefty Cornwall to be such a moment, and he perceived at the same moment the correct way of meeting that crisis.

It was with surprise no less than pleasure that the throng heard the lusty voice of their chief official inviting them to Sandy Orton’s saloon, and where they were in doubt, his beckoning arm put them right. They filled the saloon from bar to door, and those who could not enter thronged at the entrances with gaping mouths.

The sheriff was equal to the occasion. He mounted the bar much as a plainsman mounts a horse, and standing in full view of his fellow citizens, he invited Lefty Cornwall to join him in his prominent position. Nowise loath, Lefty swung onto the bar in the most approved fashion, and stood, locked arm in arm with the dignified official of Appleton. In the mean time the bartenders, thrilled equally with surprise and pleasure, passed out the drinks to the crowded room. It was apparently a moment big in portent to Appleton, and not a heart there but pulsed big with pride in their mayor.

“Fellow citizens,” began the mayor, raising a large freckled hand for silence.

A hush fell upon the assemblage.

“Boys,” continued the mayor, after a proper silence reigned, “I haven’t got much to say.”

“Here’s to you!” yelled a voice. “I hate a guy that’s noisy.”

The mayor frowned and waved a commanding hand for silence.

“I spotted you, Pete Bartlett,” he called. “If you don’t like silence you must hate yourself.”

The crowd roared with approving laughter.

“Boys,” began Orval Kendricks again, when the laughter had subsided, “this here is a solemn occasion. I feel called upon to summon the manhood of this here town to listen to my words, and I reckon that most of the manhood of the town is within hearin’.”

A chorus of assent followed.

“I don’t need any Daniel Webster to tell you men that this here town is hard hit,” continued Mayor Kendricks. “It don’t need no Henry Clay to tell you that these diggin’s are about to bust up unless we have the right sort of a strong arm man in town. We’ve been sufferin’ patiently from the aggressions of a red-handed desperado who I don’t need to mention, because his name just naturally burns my tongue.”

“Slim Malone!” cried a dozen voices. “We’re followin’ you, chief!”

The mayor thrust his hand into his breast and extended the other arm in imitation of a popular wood-cut of Patrick Henry. The crowd acknowledged the eloquence of the attitude with a common gaping.

“There may be some of you guys,” cried the mayor, rising to the emotion of the moment, “there may be some of you guys who don’t know the man I mean, but I reckon that a tolerable pile of Appleton’s best citizens spend a large part of their time cursing Slim Malone.”

“We ain’t through damning him yet,” yelled a voice, and the crowd

voiced their assent, half in growls and half in laughter.

“He has tricked our posse as an honest man would be ashamed to do,” went on the mayor, warming to his oration; “he has shot our citizens, and he has swiped our gold! I’m askin’ you as man to man, can a self-respectin’ community stand for this? It can’t. What’s the answer that Appleton makes to this desperado?”

He paused and frowned the audience into a state of suspense.

“There is only one answer to this gun-fighter, and that answer stands at my right hand,” bellowed the mayor, when he judged that the silence had sunk into his hearers sufficiently. “The name of the answer is Lefty Cornwall!”

The following burst of applause brought a momentary blush into even Lefty’s cheek. At the reiterated demands for a speech he hitched at his revolver in its skeleton holster, removed his sombrero, and mopped his forehead with a ponderous hand. When it became evident that the hero was about to break into utterance the crowd became silent.

“Fellows,” began the gun-fighter, “makin’ speeches ain’t much in my line.”

“Makin’ dead men is more your game,” broke in the wit of the assemblage.

A universal hiss attested that the crowd was anxious to hear the Texan gun-man out.

“But if you are goin’ to do me the honor of makin’ me sheriff of this here county and this here city of Appleton,” he continued, letting his eye rove down Appleton’s one street, “I’m here to state that law and order is goin’ to be maintained here at all costs. Right here I got to state that the only costs I’m referrin’ to is the price of the powder and lead for this here cannon of mine.”

The crowd broke in upon the speech with noisy appreciation, and many cries of “That’s the stuff, old boy!”

“I been hearin’ a tolerable pile about one Slim Malone,” went on the new sheriff.

“So have we,” broke in the irrepressible wit of the assemblage, only

to be choked into silence by more serious-minded neighbors.

“Sure,” agreed the sheriff. “I reckon you’ve heard a lot too much about him. But I’m here to state that all this talk about Slim Malone has got to stop, and has got to stop sudden. I’m here to stop it.”

He hitched his holster a little forward again as he spoke and a deep silence fell upon the crowd.

“Fellow citizens,” he continued, spitting liberally over the side of the bar, “whatever gun-play is carried on around here in the future is to be done strictly by me, and all you men can consider yourselves under warning to leave your shootin’-irons at home, unless you want to use them to dig premature graves.”

This advice was received with an ironical chuckle of appreciation from the crowd.

“As for Slim Malone,” he went on, “I’m goin’ out into the Weston Hills to get him single handed. I don’t want no posse. I’ll get him single handed or bust, you can lay to that; and if I come back to this town without Slim Malone, alive or dead, you can say that Malone has the Indian sign on me.”

Having finished all that he had to say, Lefty felt about in his mind to find a graceful manner of closing his exordium, when the mayor came to his assistance. He recognized that nervous clearing of the throat and wandering of the eyes out of his own first political experiences. Now he raised his glass of colored alcohol and water, which in Appleton rejoiced in the name of Bourbon.

“Boys,” he shouted, “there ain’t no better way of showin’ our appreciation of our new sheriff than by turnin’ bottoms up. Let’s go!”

Every hand in the barroom flashed into the air, and after a loud whoop there was a brief gurgling sound which warmed the heart of Sandy Orton.

It should have been the signal for a day’s carousal, and the good citizens of Appleton were no wise averse. They desired to hear the voice of their new sheriff in friendly converse. They desired to see him in that most amiable of all poses, his foot on the rail and his hand on the bar. They wanted to look him over and size him up just as a boy wishes to fondle his first gun. But the sheriff objected. He was

sorry to spoil the fun. He said that they could go ahead and have their little time, but that they must leave him out. He had business to perform that didn't admit of drinking.

There might have been adverse criticism of this Spartan strenuousness, but at this point a diversion occurred in the shape of four wild riders who broke into Appleton and brought the word that Slim Malone had been out again. This time he had held up a mule train on its way to carry provisions up Bender Cañon to Earl Parrish's claim. With his usual fine restraint Slim had taken no lives, but he had winged two of the drivers badly and had helped himself from the provisions without unnecessary waste. He had even lingered to give first aid to the two drivers whose courage had overcome their sense of proportion.

If anything had been needed to spur on the new official of Appleton it came in the form of the message which Slim Malone had left with the wounded man before he rode away.

"Tell the new sheriff," he called, as he sat easily in the saddle, "that I've heard of him, and that I'll organize a little party for him as soon as possible so that we can get better acquainted. Tell him that the one thing he lacks to make him a good fighting man is a sense of humor."

Lefty Cornwall heard this message in silence the while he spat with vicious precision into a distant spittoon. Afterward, and still in silence, he retired and worked for an hour cleaning his already shining revolver and patting and oiling the holster. He performed these grave functions in the house of the mayor, and that dignitary announced later that he had wound up by practising the draw and point, walking and sitting down, and at every angle. The mayor was impressed past speech.

When Lefty issued at last he found a score of hard riders standing by their horses in the street.

"An' what might all this here gang be for?" inquired Lefty mildly.

"We're the posse, waitin' to be sworn in," announced one of the men.

"Swearin' in takes a terrible lot of time," said Lefty, "an' besides, I don't know how it's done. I don't want no posse, as I said before. I wouldn't know how to handle it. Anyway, twenty men on horseback make enough noise to scare away a whole gang of bandits. You might as well

start lookin' for trouble with a brass band, because you'd sure find the trouble."

He hitched at his belt in his customary manner when at a loss for words, and his right hand dropped gracefully upon the handle of his gun and drooped thereon somewhat sinisterly.

"This here Malone," went on the sheriff, "may be a tolerable bad man in his way, but I ain't no shorn lamb myself. I'm goin' out to get him, an' I'm goin' to get him by myself. I reckon that's final."

They accepted his announcement with cheers, and set about offering all the information in their power. It was generally believed that the bandit lived somewhere at the far end of Eagle Head Cañon, about fifteen miles from the town. His dwelling had never been spotted, but he was most frequently seen riding to and from this place. Thrice posses had raked the cañon as with a fine-toothed comb, but they had never come upon a trace of his habitation; but the cañon was thick with caves, and heaped with giant boulders which offered innumerable places of concealment, and the legend was strong that Slim Malone lived in that place.

The next thing was to find a proper mount. This proved a more difficult task. The sheriff knew horses from nose to hoof, and he was hard to please. At last he selected a tall roan with a wicked eye and flat shoulders which promised speed. These preparations made, he swung to the saddle, waved his hand to the crowd, and galloped out of town.

There was not much bluff about Lefty Cornwall, as the curious-minded had frequently discovered in the past, but as he swung into the narrow throat of Eagle Head Cañon, he began to realize that he might have gone too far. While he was in the town it had been easy enough to make ringing speeches. Now that the evening began to come down by lazy, cool degrees a certain diffidence grew in him.

He had fought many men during his brief life, but he had never come across a reputation as strange or as fascinating as this of Slim Malone. If the challenge which the bandit had sent him was irritating, it also roused in his mind a certain degree of respect, and as he rode up the cañon, winding slowly among the boulders, a hundred doubts infested his mind.

If he had been back upon the level reaches of the Texan desert, which he knew, these uncertainties would probably have never entered his

head, but here every half mile of his journey was passed under the eye of a thousand coverts from which a man could have picked him off with the safety of a hunter firing from a blind at partridges. Moreover a curious loneliness akin to homesickness came in him, located, as far as he could discover, chiefly in the pit of the stomach.

The mountains were blue now, and purple along their upper reaches, and as the sun left off the moon took up her reign over the chill blue spaces. It was very solemn, almost funereal to the thought of Lefty Cornwall. And the silence was punctuated with the melancholy howling of a far-off coyote.

It was complete night before he reached the upper end of Eagle Head Cañon, and he was weary from the stumbling gait of his horse over the rocks. Moreover, the mountain night air was cold—very cold to Lefty. He wanted desperately to turn back, but he had not the heart to face the inquiries which would meet him at the town, and the covert smiles which would welcome the hero returning empty handed, the man who needed no posse.

Lefty was a very brave man, but like almost all of the physically courageous, he dreaded derision more than actual pain. Yet, in spite of this he finally decided that it was better to go back to the town and face the smiles than to remain through the cold night in these dread silences. He wished heartily that he had taken one other man with him if it were only for the companionship. As it was he felt that it was no use to hunt further, and he started back down the cañon. He had not gone far when his horse stumbled and commenced to limp.

Lefty got off with a curse and felt of the fore hoofs. The difficulty proved to be a sharp, three-cornered rock which had been picked up under the shoe of the left fore foot. He was bending over to pry this loose between his fingers when he caught the glint of a light.

In his excitement he sprang upright and stared. At once the light disappeared. Lefty began to feel ghostly. His senses had never played him such tricks before.

He leaned over and commenced work on the stone again, but as he did so his eye caught the same glint of light. There was no possible mistake about it this time. He remained bent over and stared at it until he was certain that he saw a yellow spot of light, a long, thin ray which pointed out to him like a finger through the shadows.

This time he took the bearings of the light carefully, and when he stood up he was able to locate it again. Lefty's heart beat high.

He threw the reins over his horse's head and commenced to stalk the light carefully. Sometimes as he slipped and stumbled over the rocks he lost sight of it altogether, only to have it reappear when he had almost given up hopes of finding it again. And so he came upon the cave.

The light shone through a little chink between two tall boulders, and as Lefty pressed his eye to the aperture, holding his breath as he did so, he saw a long dugout, perhaps a dozen paces from end to end, and some five paces wide. Behind a partition at one end he heard the stamping of a horse, and as Lefty gazed, a magnificent white head rose behind the partition and looked fairly at him. His heart stopped as that great-eyed gaze turned on him, the ears pricking and the wisp of hay motionless in the mouth. But after a moment the horse dropped his head again and went on crunching his fodder, stamping now and then and snorting as he ate.

At first he saw no other occupant of the place, but by moving his eye to one side of the aperture he managed to get a glimpse of the bandit himself. There was no question about his identity. From the descriptions which he had heard while in Appleton he knew him at once, the expressionless gray eyes, and the thin, refined face with an almost Greek modeling about its lower part.

He sat tilted back in a heavy chair smoking a pipe and reading, and Lefty saw that he sat facing a blanket at the far end of the room. Evidently this was the entrance. So far as Lefty could see the bandit was unarmed, his two long guns lying on the table half a dozen paces away.

Very softly he crept along the side of the boulder, and finally came to an aperture, as he had expected. It was just wide enough for a man to press through, and from the chisel marks at his sides it had evidently been artificially widened from time to time. At the end of the narrow passage hung the blanket.

If Lefty had proceeded cautiously up to this point, his caution now became almost animal-like. Behind that blanket he had no idea what was happening. Perhaps the bandit had heard a noise long before, and was now crouched against the wall in another part of the place, ready to open fire at the first stir of the blanket. Perhaps he had stolen out

of the cave by another entrance and was now hunting the hunter. The thought sent a chill down Lefty's back and he turned his head quickly. Then he resumed his slow progress. At the very edge of the blanket he paused for a long and deathly minute, but Lefty was not a woman, to fail at the last moment.

He swung the blanket aside and crouched in the entrance with his gun leveled. The little round sight framed the face of Slim Malone, who still sat reading quietly and puffing at a black-bowled pipe.

"Hands up!" said Lefty softly.

Even then, with his bead on his man, he did not feel entirely sure of himself. It seemed that this could not be true. Opportunity had favored him too much. There must still be some turn of the game.

The meaningless gray eyes raised calmly from the book. It seemed to Lefty that a yellow glint came into them for a moment like the light that comes into an animal's eyes when it is angered, but the next moment it was gone, and he could not be sure that it had come there at all. The rest of the face was perfectly calm. Malone lowered the book slowly and then raised his hands above his head.

"Ah, sheriff," he said quietly, "I see that you have honored my invitation."

"Right-o," said Lefty, "I'm here all right."

He felt strangely relieved after hearing his quarry speak. He stepped through the entrance and straightened up, still with the revolver leveled. It was beyond his fondest hopes that he should be able to bring the desperado alive to Appleton, and the thought of his complete success warmed his heart. Also the immediate prospect of that five-thousand-dollar bonus.

"In order to remove any strain you may be under," went on Slim Malone, "I'll assure you that I am quite unarmed. My guns are both lying on the table there. In order that you may make sure, I shall stand up, with my hands over my head, and turn around slowly. You can examine me to your own satisfaction."

He did as he had said, and Lefty's practised eyes saw that there was not the suspicion of a lump under the clothes.

“Now,” said Slim Malone, as he faced his captor again, and his smile was strangely winning, “I hope that I may lower my arms and we can commence our little party.”

“Your end of this here party is all over, my beauty,” said Lefty grimly, “except that the boys at Appleton may give you a little impromptu reception when we hit town. They seem to be rather strong on celebrations.”

“So I understand,” smiled Slim Malone. “I have no doubt they will be glad to see me.”

“Ain’t no doubt in the world,” grinned Lefty, warming to the perfect calm of this man. “Between you an’ me, pal, I’m sorry to have to turn this little trick; but—”

Malone waved a careless and reassuring hand.

“Business is business, my dear fellow,” he said.

“That bein’ the case,” said Lefty, “I’ll have to ask you to turn around and put your hands behind your back while I put these here bracelets on. I don’t want to discourage you any, but while I’m doin’ it this here gun will be in my hand and pointin’ at your back.”

“Naturally,” nodded Malone; “quite right, of course; but before we start on our little jaunt back to the camp won’t you have a drink with me? I have some really rare old stuff here; quite different from the firewater they put labels on in Appleton.”

Lefty grinned appreciatively.

“It’s a good move, pal,” he said, shaking his head with admiration, “an’ I know that you’re hard put to it or you wouldn’t try such an old dodge on me. It’s a good move, but down in Texas the booze stunt is so old that they’ve almost forgotten it—not quite!”

“Ah,” said Malone, with a little sigh of regret, “then I suppose we shall have to ride out in the night without a nip. Gets mighty chilly here before morning, you know.”

This fact had gradually dawned on Lefty during his ride up the valley, and as he looked forward to the journey back he shivered with unpleasant anticipation. In Texas a summer night was one thing; in

these mountains it was quite another.

“I suppose the booze is the real thing,” he inquired casually.

“There are little bubbles under the glass,” said Slim Malone with subtle emotion.

Lefty Cornwall sighed deeply. The taste of the Appleton bar whisky still burned his mouth. After all this fellow was a man. He might be a criminal, but Lefty’s own past was not free from shady episodes. Furthermore he was about to make five thousand dollars on presenting him to the good people of Appleton.

“If you sure want a drink before we start, go ahead,” said Lefty.

“The bottle and a glass is over there in that little dugout on the wall,” pointed Malone.

In the little open hutch on the wall the sheriff perceived a tall bottle which shimmered pleasantly in the torch-light.

“Go ahead,” said the sheriff, “I reckon you know I’m watchin’ all the time.”

“Surely,” said Malone pleasantly. “I know you’re on your job all the time.”

He walked over to the hutch and picked up the bottle and the glass. He paused with the bottle tucked away under his arm.

“Queer thing,” pondered Malone, “the same pack that held this bottle of whisky held this also.”

Lefty tightened his grip on the gun as Malone reached deeper into the hutch, but he straightened again, and appeared carrying a large concert banjo.

“That fellow had taste,” he continued, crossing the room and laying down the banjo carelessly on the chair; “just run your eyes over that banjo.”

“Some banjo, all right,” said the sheriff, “but hurry up with your drink, Malone. We’ve got to be on our way.”

Malone uncorked the bottle and held it under his nose while he inhaled a whiff.

“The old aroma, all right,” he pronounced with the air of a connoisseur; “must be a vintage as far back as the eighties. You won’t join me?”

Now the heart of the sheriff was a human heart, but his will was adamant.

“Not me, Malone,” he answered, “I’ve been in the game too long. Can’t drink on this sort of a job.”

“Guess you’re right,” murmured Malone, letting the amber stream trickle slowly into the glass; “but it’s too bad.”

He raised the glass to his lips and swallowed half of the contents slowly.

“The stuff is so oily,” he mused, “that you don’t need a chaser. Just sort of oils its own way down, you know.”

The sheriff moistened his lips.

“It certainly is a shame that you can’t taste it,” continued Malone, as he drained the glass.

The sheriff hitched his belt with his customary gesture.

“It looks like the real thing,” he said judicially.

“It is,” pronounced Malone with decision, “and after the sort of poison they serve you around here—”

The sheriff shuddered with sympathy.

“I reckon,” he said hesitatingly, “that you might pour me just a drop.”

It seemed to him that as he spoke the yellow glint came into the eyes of Malone again, but a moment later it was gone, and he decided that the change had been merely a shadow from the wavering torch-light. He took the glass which Malone extended to him under the cover of the pointed gun and raised it slowly to his lips.

“Just stand a bit further back while I drink, pal,” he said.

Malone obeyed, and the sheriff tilted the glass. It was, as Malone had said, “the real old aroma,” and the sheriff drew a deep breath.

Now there is a saying about liquor that the drink which does the harm is “just one more,” and certain it is that one whisky calls for another as surely as a question calls for an answer.

“I reckon it ain’t quite as old as you say,” said the sheriff, feeling his way from word to word cautiously. “I reckon it ain’t more than fifteen years old at the outside.”

Malone paused, with the bottle suspended over the glass to consider.

“I thought that myself when I first drank,” he nodded; “but that was before I got used to it. All Bourbon is a little sharp, you know.”

The sheriff was inclined to agree. He also felt sure that one more drink would quite banish from his memory the taste of that one drink in Appleton. Moreover, the danger, if there was any, was slight, for Malone was taking drink for drink with him, and larger drinks at that. It was a sort of subtle challenge to the manhood of the sheriff, and he was as proud of his capacity for whisky as of his speed with a gun.

It was perhaps half an hour later that the sheriff indicated the banjo with a careless wave of the pistol.

“Play any?” he inquired, “or do you keep it around as sort of an ornament?”

“Both,” smiled Malone. “It makes the place more homelike, you know, and then I sing once in a while, but not often. Folks around here aren’t particularly partial to my voice.”

“I’m a pretty good judge,” stated the sheriff; “blaze away, and I’ll see you ain’t interrupted. Been a long time since I had the pleasure of hearing any decent singin’.”

He was, as he said, a fairly good judge, and he was delighted with the rich barytone which rang through the cave. After a time, as the whisky and the music melted into his mood, he began to call for old favorites, darky ballads, and last of all, for the sentimental ditties

which have always charmed the heart of the rough men of the West: “Annie Laurie,” “Old Black Joe,” “Ben Bolt,” “Silver Threads Among the Gold.”

As he sang the bandit commenced, naturally, to walk back and forth through the cave, and the sheriff sat back in the chair and with half-closed eyes waved the revolver back and forth in time. He failed to note that as Malone walked up and down each time he made a longer trip, until at last he was pacing and turning close to the table on which lay the revolvers side by side. He did not note it, or if he did his mind was too thrilled with the tender airs and the tenderer liquor to register the fact clearly. It faded into the pleasant blur of his sensations.

> Oh, don’t you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt, Sweet Alice with—

The music stopped. Malone had stooped over the table with the speed of a bird picking up a grain of wheat, and with the same movement he whirled and fired. The gun spun from the hand of the sheriff and he stood staring into eyes which now beyond all doubt flared with a yellow animal fire.

“Now put your hands behind your back after you’ve thrown those bracelets to me,” said Malone. “I naturally hate to break up this party, but I think you’ve had about enough whisky to keep you warm on the ride back, Lefty, my boy.”

There was an insane desire on the sheriff’s part to leap upon Malone bare-handed, but he had seen too many fighting men in action before. He knew the meaning of those eyes and the steadiness of the revolver.

“It’s your game, Slim,” he said, with as little bitterness as possible; “but will you tell me why in the name of God you aren’t on the stage? It isn’t what you do, pal, it’s the way you do it!”

Appleton woke early the next morning. Some one shouted and then fired a pistol. The populace gathered at windows and doors rubbing sleepy eyes which a moment later shone wide awake, and yawns turned into yells of laughter, for down the middle of Appleton’s one street came the sheriff. He was sitting the roan horse, with his feet tied below the girth, and his hands tied behind his back. And even the weary roan seemed to feel in his drooping head the defeat of his rider.

Upon the back of the sheriff was a large piece of cardboard, upon which was printed in large letters the following:

> I’m sending this back with my signature in token of a pleasant evening in my home in Eagle Head Cañon. I’m sorry to announce that I’m moved. Slim Malone.

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Cather in 1921

A GOLD SLIPPER
The Project Gutenberg eBook, Youth and the Bright Medusa, by Willa Cather

Marshall McKann followed his wife and her friend Mrs. Post down the aisle and up the steps to the stage of the Carnegie Music Hall with an ill-concealed feeling of grievance. Heaven knew he never went to concerts, and to be mounted upon the stage in this fashion, as if he were a "highbrow" from Sewickley, or some unfortunate with a musical wife, was ludicrous. A man went to concerts when he was courting, while he was a junior partner. When he became a person of substance he stopped that sort of nonsense. His wife, too, was a sensible person, the daughter of an old Pittsburgh family as solid and well-rooted as the McKanns. She would never have bothered him about this concert had not the meddlesome Mrs. Post arrived to pay her a visit. Mrs. Post was an old school friend of Mrs. McKann, and because she lived in Cincinnati she was always keeping up with the world and talking about things in which no one else was interested, music among them. She was an aggressive lady, with weighty opinions, and a deep voice like a jovial bassoon. She had arrived only last night, and at dinner she brought it out that she could on no account miss Kitty Ayrshire's recital; it was, she said, the sort of thing no one could afford to miss.

When McKann went into town in the morning he found that every seat in the music-hall was sold. He telephoned his wife to that effect, and, thinking he had settled the matter, made his reservation on the 11.25 train for New York. He was unable to get a drawing-room because this same Kitty Ayrshire had taken the last one. He had not intended going to New York until the following week, but he preferred to be absent during Mrs. Post's incumbency.

In the middle of the morning, when he was deep in his correspondence, his wife called him up to say the enterprising Mrs. Post had telephoned some musical friends in Sewickley and had found that two hundred folding-chairs were to be placed on the stage of the concert-hall, behind the piano, and that they would be on sale at noon. Would he please get seats in the front row? McKann asked if they would not excuse him, since he was going over to New York on the late train, would be tired, and would not have time to dress, etc. No, not at all. It would be foolish for two women to trail up to the stage unattended. Mrs. Post's husband always accompanied her to concerts, and she expected that much attention from her host. He needn't dress, and he could take a taxi from the concert-hall to the East Liberty station.

The outcome of it all was that, though his bag was at the station, here was McKann, in the worst possible humour, facing the large audience to which he was well known, and sitting among a lot of music students and excitable old maids. Only the desperately zealous or the morbidly curious would endure two hours in those wooden chairs, and he sat in the front row of this hectic body, somehow made a party to a transaction for which he had the utmost contempt.

When McKann had been in Paris, Kitty Ayrshire was singing at the Comique, and he wouldn't go to hear her--even there, where one found so little that was better to do. She was too much talked about, too much advertised; always being thrust in an American's face as if she were something to be proud of. Perfumes and petticoats and cutlets were named for her. Some one had pointed Kitty out to him one afternoon when she was driving in the Bois with a French composer--old enough, he judged, to be her father--who was said to be infatuated, carried away by her. McKann was told that this was one of the historic passions of old age. He had looked at her on that occasion, but she was so befrilled and befeathered that he caught nothing but a graceful outline and a small, dark head above a white ostrich boa. He had noted with disgust, however, the stooped shoulders and white imperial of the silk-hatted man beside her, and the senescent line of his back. McKann described to his wife this unpleasing picture only last night, while he was undressing, when he was making every possible effort to avert this concert party. But Bessie only looked superior and said she wished to hear Kitty Ayrshire sing, and that her "private life" was something in which she had no interest.

Well, here he was; hot and uncomfortable, in a chair much too small for him, with a row of blinding footlights glaring in his eyes. Suddenly the door at his right elbow opened. Their seats were at one end of the front

row; he had thought they would be less conspicuous there than in the centre, and he had not foreseen that the singer would walk over him every time she came upon the stage. Her velvet train brushed against his trousers as she passed him. The applause which greeted her was neither overwhelming nor prolonged. Her conservative audience did not know exactly how to accept her toilette. They were accustomed to dignified concert gowns, like those which Pittsburgh matrons (in those days!) wore at their daughters' coming-out teas.

Kitty's gown that evening was really quite outrageous--the repartée of a conscienceless Parisian designer who took her hint that she wished something that would be entirely novel in the States. Today, after we have all of us, even in the uttermost provinces, been educated by Baskt and the various Ballets Russes, we would accept such a gown without distrust; but then it was a little disconcerting, even to the well-disposed. It was constructed of a yard or two of green velvet--a reviling, shrieking green which would have made a fright of any woman who had not inextinguishable beauty--and it was made without armholes, a device to which we were then so unaccustomed that it was nothing less than alarming. The velvet skirt split back from a transparent gold-lace petticoat, gold stockings, gold slippers. The narrow train was, apparently, looped to both ankles, and it kept curling about her feet like a serpent's tail, turning up its gold lining as if it were squirming over on its back. It was not, we felt, a costume in which to sing Mozart and Handel and Beethoven.

Kitty sensed the chill in the air, and it amused her. She liked to be thought a brilliant artist by other artists, but by the world at large she liked to be thought a daring creature. She had every reason to believe, from experience and from example, that to shock the great crowd was the surest way to get its money and to make her name a household word. Nobody ever became a household word of being an artist, surely; and you were not a thoroughly paying proposition until your name meant something on the sidewalk and in the barber-shop. Kitty studied her audience with an appraising eye. She liked the stimulus of this disapprobation. As she faced this hard-shelled public she felt keen and interested; she knew that she would give such a recital as cannot often be heard for money. She nodded gaily to the young man at the piano, fell into an attitude of seriousness, and began the group of Beethoven and Mozart songs.

Though McKann would not have admitted it, there were really a great many people in the concert-hall who knew what the prodigal daughter of their country was singing, and how well she was doing it. They thawed gradually

under the beauty of her voice and the subtlety of her interpretation. She had sung seldom in concert then, and they had supposed her very dependent upon the accessories of the opera. Clean singing, finished artistry, were not what they expected from her. They began to feel, even, the wayward charm of her personality.

McKann, who stared coldly up at the balconies during her first song, during the second glanced cautiously at the green apparition before him. He was vexed with her for having retained a débutante figure. He comfortably classed all singers--especially operatic singers--as "fat Dutchwomen" or "shifty Sadies," and Kitty would not fit into his clever generalization. She displayed, under his nose, the only kind of figure he considered worth looking at--that of a very young girl, supple and sinuous and quicksilverish; thin, eager shoulders, polished white arms that were nowhere too fat and nowhere too thin. McKann found it agreeable to look at Kitty, but when he saw that the authoritative Mrs. Post, red as a turkey-cock with opinions she was bursting to impart, was studying and appraising the singer through her lorgnette, he gazed indifferently out into the house again. He felt for his watch, but his wife touched him warningly with her elbow--which, he noticed, was not at all like Kitty's.

When Miss Ayrshire finished her first group of songs, her audience expressed its approval positively, but guardedly. She smiled bewitchingly upon the people in front, glanced up at the balconies, and then turned to the company huddled on the stage behind her. After her gay and careless bows, she retreated toward the stage door. As she passed McKann, she again brushed lightly against him, and this time she paused long enough to glance down at him and murmur, "Pardon!"

In the moment her bright, curious eyes rested upon him, McKann seemed to see himself as if she were holding a mirror up before him. He beheld himself a heavy, solid figure, unsuitably clad for the time and place, with a florid, square face, well-visored with good living and sane opinions--an inexpressive countenance. Not a rock face, exactly, but a kind of pressed-brick-and-cement face, a "business" face upon which years and feelings had made no mark--in which cocktails might eventually blast out a few hollows. He had never seen himself so distinctly in his shaving-glass as he did in that instant when Kitty Ayrshire's liquid eye held him, when her bright, inquiring glance roamed over his person. After her prehensile train curled over his boot and she was gone, his wife turned to him and said in the tone of approbation one uses when an infant manifests its groping intelligence, "Very gracious of her, I'm sure!" Mrs. Post nodded oracularly. McKann grunted.

Kitty began her second number, a group of romantic German songs which were altogether more her affair than her first number. When she turned once to acknowledge the applause behind her, she caught McKann in the act of yawning behind his hand--he of course wore no gloves--and he thought she frowned a little. This did not embarrass him; it somehow made him feel important. When she retired after the second part of the program, she again looked him over curiously as she passed, and she took marked precaution that her dress did not touch him. Mrs. Post and his wife again commented upon her consideration.

The final number was made up of modern French songs which Kitty sang enchantingly, and at last her frigid public was thoroughly aroused. While she was coming back again and again to smile and curtsy, McKann whispered to his wife that if there were to be encores he had better make a dash for his train.

"Not at all," put in Mrs. Post. "Kitty is going on the same train. She sings in _Faust_ at the opera tomorrow night, so she'll take no chances."

McKann once more told himself how sorry he felt for Post. At last Miss Ayrshire returned, escorted by her accompanist, and gave the people what she of course knew they wanted: the most popular aria from the French opera of which the title-rôle had become synonymous with her name--an opera written for her and to her and round about her, by the veteran French composer who adored her,--the last and not the palest flash of his creative fire. This brought her audience all the way. They clamoured for more of it, but she was not to be coerced. She had been unyielding through storms to which this was a summer breeze. She came on once more, shrugged her shoulders, blew them a kiss, and was gone. Her last smile was for that uncomfortable part of her audience seated behind her, and she looked with recognition at McKann and his ladies as she nodded good night to the wooden chairs.

McKann hurried his charges into the foyer by the nearest exit and put them into his motor. Then he went over to the Schenley to have a glass of beer and a rarebit before train-time. He had not, he admitted to himself, been so much bored as he pretended. The minx herself was well enough, but it was absurd in his fellow-townsmen to look owlish and uplifted about her. He had no rooted dislike for pretty women; he even didn't deny that gay girls had their place in the world, but they ought to be kept in their place. He was born a Presbyterian, just as he was born a McKann. He sat in his pew in the First Church every Sunday, and he never missed a presbytery meeting when he was in town. His religion was

not very spiritual, certainly, but it was substantial and concrete, made up of good, hard convictions and opinions. It had something to do with citizenship, with whom one ought to marry, with the coal business (in which his own name was powerful), with the Republican party, and with all majorities and established precedents. He was hostile to fads, to enthusiasms, to individualism, to all changes except in mining machinery and in methods of transportation.

His equanimity restored by his lunch at the Schenley, McKann lit a big cigar, got into his taxi, and bowled off through the sleet.

There was not a sound to be heard or a light to be seen. The ice glittered on the pavement and on the naked trees. No restless feet were abroad. At eleven o'clock the rows of small, comfortable houses looked as empty of the troublesome bubble of life as the Allegheny cemetery itself. Suddenly the cab stopped, and McKann thrust his head out of the window. A woman was standing in the middle of the street addressing his driver in a tone of excitement. Over against the curb a lone electric stood despondent in the storm. The young woman, her cloak blowing about her, turned from the driver to McKann himself, speaking rapidly and somewhat incoherently.

"Could you not be so kind as to help us? It is Mees Ayrshire, the singer. The juice is gone out and we cannot move. We must get to the station. Mademoiselle cannot miss the train; she sings tomorrow night in New York. It is very important. Could you not take us to the station at East Liberty?"

McKann opened the door. "That's all right, but you'll have to hurry. It's eleven-ten now. You've only got fifteen minutes to make the train. Tell her to come along."

The maid drew back and looked up at him in amazement. "But, the hand-luggage to carry, and Mademoiselle to walk! The street is like glass!"

McKann threw away his cigar and followed her. He stood silent by the door of the derelict, while the maid explained that she had found help. The driver had gone off somewhere to telephone for a car. Miss Ayrshire seemed not at all apprehensive; she had not doubted that a rescuer would be forthcoming. She moved deliberately; out of a whirl of skirts she thrust one fur-topped shoe--McKann saw the flash of the gold stocking above it--and alighted.

"So kind of you! So fortunate for us!" she murmured. One hand she placed upon his sleeve, and in the other she carried an armful of roses that had been sent up to the concert stage. The petals showered upon the sooty, sleety pavement as she picked her way along. They would be lying there tomorrow morning, and the children in those houses would wonder if there had been a funeral. The maid followed with two leather bags. As soon as he had lifted Kitty into his cab she exclaimed:

"My jewel-case! I have forgotten it. It is on the back seat, please. I am so careless!"

He dashed back, ran his hand along the cushions, and discovered a small leather bag. When he returned he found the maid and the luggage bestowed on the front seat, and a place left for him on the back seat beside Kitty and her flowers.

"Shall we be taking you far out of your way?" she asked sweetly. "I haven't an idea where the station is. I'm not even sure about the name. Céline thinks it is East Liberty, but I think it is West Liberty. An odd name, anyway. It is a Bohemian quarter, perhaps? A district where the law relaxes a trifle?"

McKann replied grimly that he didn't think the name referred to that kind of liberty.

"So much the better," sighed Kitty. "I am a Californian; that's the only part of America I know very well, and out there, when we called a place Liberty Hill or Liberty Hollow--well, we meant it. You will excuse me if I'm uncommunicative, won't you? I must not talk in this raw air. My throat is sensitive after a long program." She lay back in her corner and closed her eyes.

When the cab rolled down the incline at East Liberty station, the New York express was whistling in. A porter opened the door. McKann sprang out, gave him a claim check and his Pullman ticket, and told him to get his bag at the check-stand and rush it on that train.

Miss Ayrshire, having gathered up her flowers, put out her hand to take his arm. "Why, it's you!" she exclaimed, as she saw his face in the light. "What a coincidence!" She made no further move to alight, but sat smiling as if she had just seated herself in a drawing-room and were ready for talk and a cup of tea.

McKann caught her arm. "You must hurry, Miss Ayrshire, if you mean to

catch that train. It stops here only a moment. Can you run?"

"Can I run!" she laughed. "Try me!"

As they raced through the tunnel and up the inside stairway, McKann admitted that he had never before made a dash with feet so quick and sure stepping out beside him. The white-furred boots chased each other like lambs at play, the gold stockings flashed like the spokes of a bicycle wheel in the sun. They reached the door of Miss Ayrshire's state-room just as the train began to pull out. McKann was ashamed of the way he was panting, for Kitty's breathing was as soft and regular as when she was reclining on the back seat of his taxi. It had somehow run in his head that all these stage women were a poor lot physically--unsound, overfed creatures, like canaries that are kept in a cage and stuffed with song-restorer. He retreated to escape her thanks. "Good night! Pleasant journey! Pleasant dreams!" With a friendly nod in Kitty's direction he closed the door behind him.

He was somewhat surprised to find his own bag, his Pullman ticket in the strap, on the seat just outside Kitty's door. But there was nothing strange about it. He had got the last section left on the train, No. 13, next the drawing-room. Every other berth in the car was made up. He was just starting to look for the porter when the door of the state-room opened and Kitty Ayrshire came out. She seated herself carelessly in the front seat beside his bag.

"Please talk to me a little," she said coaxingly. "I'm always wakeful after I sing, and I have to hunt some one to talk to. Céline and I get so tired of each other. We can speak very low, and we shall not disturb any one." She crossed her feet and rested her elbow on his Gladstone. Though she still wore her gold slippers and stockings, she did not, he thanked Heaven, have on her concert gown, but a very demure black velvet with some sort of pearl trimming about the neck. "Wasn't it funny," she proceeded, "that it happened to be you who picked me up? I wanted a word with you, anyway."

McKann smiled in a way that meant he wasn't being taken in. "Did you? We are not very old acquaintances."

"No, perhaps not. But you disapproved tonight, and I thought I was singing very well. You are very critical in such matters?"

He had been standing, but now he sat down. "My dear young lady, I am not critical at all. I know nothing about 'such matters.'"

"And care less?" she said for him, "Well, then we know where we are, in so far as that is concerned. What did displease you? My gown, perhaps? It may seem a little _outré_ here, but it's the sort of thing all the imaginative designers abroad are doing. You like the English sort of concert gown better?"

"About gowns," said McKann, "I know even less than about music. If I looked uncomfortable, it was probably because I was uncomfortable. The seats were bad and the lights were annoying."

Kitty looked up with solicitude. "I was sorry they sold those seats. I don't like to make people uncomfortable in any way. Did the lights give you a headache? They are very trying. They burn one's eyes out in the end, I believe." She paused and waved the porter away with a smile as he came toward them. Half-clad Pittsburghers were tramping up and down the aisle, casting sidelong glances at McKann and his companion. "How much better they look with all their clothes on," she murmured. Then, turning directly to McKann again: "I saw you were not well seated, but I felt something quite hostile and personal. You were displeased with me. Doubtless many people are, but I seldom get an opportunity to question them. It would be nice if you took the trouble to tell me why you were displeased."

She spoke frankly, pleasantly, without a shadow of challenge or hauteur. She did not seem to be angling for compliments. McKann settled himself in his seat. He thought he would try her out. She had come for it, and he would let her have it. He found, however, that it was harder to formulate the grounds of his disapproval than he would have supposed. Now that he sat face to face with her, now that she was leaning against his bag, he had no wish to hurt her.

"I'm a hard-headed business man," he said evasively, "and I don't much believe in any of you fluffy-ruffles people. I have a sort of natural distrust of them all, the men more than the women."

She looked thoughtful. "Artists, you mean?" drawing her words slowly. "What is your business?"

"Coal."

"I don't feel any natural distrust of business men, and I know ever so many. I don't know any coal-men, but I think I could become very much interested in coal. Am I larger-minded than you?"

McKann laughed. "I don't think you know when you are interested or when you are not. I don't believe you know what it feels like to be really interested. There is so much fake about your profession. It's an affectation on both sides. I know a great many of the people who went to hear you tonight, and I know that most of them neither know nor care anything about music. They imagine they do, because it's supposed to be the proper thing."

Kitty sat upright and looked interested. She was certainly a lovely creature--the only one of her tribe he had ever seen that he would cross the street to see again. Those were remarkable eyes she had--curious, penetrating, restless, somewhat impudent, but not at all dulled by self-conceit.

"But isn't that so in everything?" she cried. "How many of your clerks are honest because of a fine, individual sense of honour? They are honest because it is the accepted rule of good conduct in business. Do you know"--she looked at him squarely--"I thought you would have something quite definite to say to me; but this is funny-paper stuff, the sort of objection I'd expect from your office-boy."

"Then you don't think it silly for a lot of people to get together and pretend to enjoy something they know nothing about?"

"Of course I think it silly, but that's the way God made audiences. Don't people go to church in exactly the same way? If there were a spiritual-pressure test-machine at the door, I suspect not many of you would get to your pews."

"How do you know I go to church?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, people with these old, ready-made opinions usually go to church. But you can't evade me like that." She tapped the edge of his seat with the toe of her gold slipper. "You sat there all evening, glaring at me as if you could eat me alive. Now I give you a chance to state your objections, and you merely criticize my audience. What is it? Is it merely that you happen to dislike my personality? In that case, of course, I won't press you."

"No," McKann frowned, "I perhaps dislike your professional personality. As I told you, I have a natural distrust of your variety."

"Natural, I wonder?" Kitty murmured. "I don't see why you should

naturally dislike singers any more than I naturally dislike coal-men. I don't classify people by their occupations. Doubtless I should find some coal-men repulsive, and you may find some singers so. But I have reason to believe that, at least, I'm one of the less repellent."

"I don't doubt it," McKann laughed, "and you're a shrewd woman to boot. But you are, all of you, according to my standards, light people. You're brilliant, some of you, but you've no depth."

Kitty seemed to assent, with a dive of her girlish head. "Well, it's a merit in some things to be heavy, and in others to be light. Some things are meant to go deep, and others to go high. Do you want all the women in the world to be profound?"

"You are all," he went on steadily, watching her with indulgence, "fed on hectic emotions. You are pampered. You don't help to carry the burdens of the world. You are self-indulgent and appetent."

"Yes, I am," she assented, with a candour which he did not expect. "Not all artists are, but I am. Why not? If I could once get a convincing statement as to why I should not be self-indulgent, I might change my ways. As for the burdens of the world--" Kitty rested her chin on her clasped hands and looked thoughtful. "One should give pleasure to others. My dear sir, granting that the great majority of people can't enjoy anything very keenly, you'll admit that I give pleasure to many more people than you do. One should help others who are less fortunate; at present I am supporting just eight people, besides those I hire. There was never another family in California that had so many cripples and hard-luckers as that into which I had the honour to be born. The only ones who could take care of themselves were ruined by the San Francisco earthquake some time ago. One should make personal sacrifices. I do; I give money and time and effort to talented students. Oh, I give something much more than that! something that you probably have never given to any one. I give, to the really gifted ones, my _wish,_ my desire, my light, if I have any; and that, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, is like giving one's blood! It's the kind of thing you prudent people never give. That is what was in the box of precious ointment." Kitty threw off her fervour with a slight gesture, as if it were a scarf, and leaned back, tucking her slipper up on the edge of his seat. "If you saw the houses I keep up," she sighed, "and the people I employ, and the motor-cars I run--And, after all, I've only this to do it with." She indicated her slender person, which Marshall could almost have broken in two with his bare hands.

She was, he thought, very much like any other charming woman, except that she was more so. Her familiarity was natural and simple. She was at ease because she was not afraid of him or of herself, or of certain half-clad acquaintances of his who had been wandering up and down the car oftener than was necessary. Well, he was not afraid, either.

Kitty put her arms over her head and sighed again, feeling the smooth part in her black hair. Her head was small--capable of great agitation, like a bird's; or of great resignation, like a nun's. "I can't see why I shouldn't be self-indulgent, when I indulge others. I can't understand your equivocal scheme of ethics. Now I can understand Count Tolstoy's, perfectly. I had a long talk with him once, about his book 'What is Art?' As nearly as I could get it, he believes that we are a race who can exist only by gratifying appetites; the appetites are evil, and the existence they carry on is evil. We were always sad, he says, without knowing why; even in the Stone Age. In some miraculous way a divine ideal was disclosed to us, directly at variance with our appetites. It gave us a new craving, which we could only satisfy by starving all the other hungers in us. Happiness lies in ceasing to be and to cause being, because the thing revealed to us is dearer than any existence our appetites can ever get for us. I can understand that. It's something one often feels in art. It is even the subject of the greatest of all operas, which, because I can never hope to sing it, I love more than all the others." Kitty pulled herself up. "Perhaps you agree with Tolstoy?" she added languidly.

"No; I think he's a crank," said McKann, cheerfully.

"What do you mean by a crank?"

"I mean an extremist."

Kitty laughed. "Weighty word! You'll always have a world full of people who keep to the golden mean. Why bother yourself about me and Tolstoy?"

"I don't, except when you bother me."

"Poor man! It's true this isn't your fault. Still, you did provoke it by glaring at me. Why did you go to the concert?"

"I was dragged."

"I might have known!" she chuckled, and shook her head. "No, you don't give me any good reasons. Your morality seems to me the compromise of

cowardice, apologetic and sneaking. When righteousness becomes alive and burning, you hate it as much as you do beauty. You want a little of each in your life, perhaps--adulterated, sterilized, with the sting taken out. It's true enough they are both fearsome things when they get loose in the world; they don't, often."

McKann hated tall talk. "My views on women," he said slowly, "are simple."

"Doubtless," Kitty responded dryly, "but are they consistent? Do you apply them to your stenographers as well as to me? I take it for granted you have unmarried stenographers. Their position, economically, is the same as mine."

McKann studied the toe of her shoe. "With a woman, everything comes back to one thing." His manner was judicial.

She laughed indulgently. "So we are getting down to brass tacks, eh? I have beaten you in argument, and now you are leading trumps."

She put her hands behind her head and her lips parted in a half-yawn. "Does everything come back to one thing? I wish I knew! It's more than likely that, under the same conditions, I should have been very like your stenographers--if they are good ones. Whatever I was, I would have been a good one. I think people are very much alike. You are more different than any one I have met for some time, but I know that there are a great many more at home like you. And even you--I believe there is a real creature down under these custom-made prejudices that save you the trouble of thinking. If you and I were shipwrecked on a desert island, I have no doubt that we would come to a simple and natural understanding. I'm neither a coward nor a shirk. You would find, if you had to undertake any enterprise of danger or difficulty with a woman, that there are several qualifications quite as important as the one to which you doubtless refer."

McKann felt nervously for his watch-chain. "Of course," he brought out, "I am not laying down any generalizations--" His brows wrinkled.

"Oh, aren't you?" murmured Kitty. "Then I totally misunderstood. But remember"--holding up a finger--"it is you, not I, who are afraid to pursue this subject further. Now, I'll tell you something." She leaned forward and clasped her slim, white hands about her velvet knee. "I am as much a victim of these ineradicable prejudices as you. Your stenographer seems to you a better sort. Well, she does to me. Just

because her life is, presumably, greyer than mine, she seems better. My mind tells me that dulness, and a mediocre order of ability, and poverty, are not in themselves admirable things. Yet in my heart I always feel that the sales-women in shops and the working girls in factories are more meritorious than I. Many of them, with my opportunities, would be more selfish than I am. Some of them, with their own opportunities, are more selfish. Yet I make this sentimental genuflection before the nun and the charwoman. Tell me, haven't you any weakness? Isn't there any foolish natural thing that unbends you a trifle and makes you feel gay?"

"I like to go fishing."

"To see how many fish you can catch?"

"No, I like the woods and the weather. I like to play a fish and work hard for him. I like the pussy-willows and the cold; and the sky, whether it's blue or grey--night coming on, every thing about it."

He spoke devoutly, and Kitty watched him through half-closed eyes. "And you like to feel that there are light-minded girls like me, who only care about the inside of shops and theatres and hotels, eh? You amuse me, you and your fish! But I mustn't keep you any longer. Haven't I given you every opportunity to state your case against me? I thought you would have more to say for yourself. Do you know, I believe it's not a case you have at all, but a grudge. I believe you are envious; that you'd like to be a tenor, and a perfect lady-killer!" She rose, smiling, and paused with her hand on the door of her stateroom. "Anyhow, thank you for a pleasant evening. And, by the way, dream of me tonight, and not of either of those ladies who sat beside you. It does not matter much whom we live with in this world, but it matters a great deal whom we dream of." She noticed his bricky flush. "You are very naive, after all, but, oh, so cautious! You are naturally afraid of everything new, just as I naturally want to try everything: new people, new religions--new miseries, even. If only there were more new things--If only you were really new! I might learn something. I'm like the Queen of Sheba--I'm not above learning. But you, my friend, would be afraid to try a new shaving soap. It isn't gravitation that holds the world in place; it's the lazy, obese cowardice of the people on it. All the same"--taking his hand and smiling encouragingly--"I'm going to haunt you a little. _Adios!_"

When Kitty entered her state-room, Céline, in her dressing-gown, was nodding by the window.

"Mademoiselle found the fat gentleman interesting?" she asked. "It is

nearly one."

"Negatively interesting. His kind always say the same thing. If I could find one really intelligent man who held his views, I should adopt them."

"Monsieur did not look like an original," murmured Céline, as she began to take down her lady's hair.

* * * * *

McKann slept heavily, as usual, and the porter had to shake him in the morning. He sat up in his berth, and, after composing his hair with his fingers, began to hunt about for his clothes. As he put up the window-blind some bright object in the little hammock over his bed caught the sunlight and glittered. He stared and picked up a delicately turned gold slipper.

"Minx! hussy!" he ejaculated. "All that tall talk--! Probably got it from some man who hangs about; learned it off like a parrot. Did she poke this in here herself last night, or did she send that sneak-faced Frenchwoman? I like her nerve!" He wondered whether he might have been breathing audibly when the intruder thrust her head between his curtains. He was conscious that he did not look a Prince Charming in his sleep. He dressed as fast as he could, and, when he was ready to go to the wash-room, glared at the slipper. If the porter should start to make up his berth in his absence--He caught the slipper, wrapped it in his pajama jacket, and thrust it into his bag. He escaped from the train without seeing his tormentor again.

Later McKann threw the slipper into the waste-basket in his room at the Knickerbocker, but the chambermaid, seeing that it was new and mateless, thought there must be a mistake, and placed it in his clothes-closet. He found it there when he returned from the theatre that evening. Considerably mellowed by food and drink and cheerful company, he took the slipper in his hand and decided to keep it as a reminder that absurd things could happen to people of the most clocklike deportment. When he got back to Pittsburgh, he stuck it in a lock-box in his vault, safe from prying clerks.

* * * * *

McKann has been ill for five years now, poor fellow! He still goes to the office, because it is the only place that interests him, but his partners do most of the work, and his clerks find him sadly changed--"morbid,"

they call his state of mind. He has had the pine-trees in his yard cut down because they remind him of cemeteries. On Sundays or holidays, when the office is empty, and he takes his will or his insurance-policies out of his lock-box, he often puts the tarnished gold slipper on his desk and looks at it. Somehow it suggests life to his tired mind, as his pine-trees suggested death--life and youth. When he drops over some day, his executors will be puzzled by the slipper.

As for Kitty Ayrshire, she has played so many jokes, practical and impractical, since then, that she has long ago forgotten the night when she threw away a slipper to be a thorn in the side of a just man.

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